252# 1885 Alachua County Court House (Script by Peggy Macdonald)

One of the biggest problems Gainesville faced after the construction of the first Alachua County Court House in 1856 was how to prevent hogs from roaming under the building and disrupting court. In 1885, a new red brick courthouse was constructed. With the pig problem solved, two quiet copper lion statues and Florida coats of arms were added above two arched entrances to the building.

In 1883, when a well was dug at the site of the first Alachua County Court House, workers discovered gold deep underneath the courthouse square. Located 173 feet underground, the gold would have been too expensive to remove. A treasure trove of gold remains underground to this day.

The red brick courthouse served as the center of the downtown community. The chime of the 1885 Seth Thomas clock atop the courthouse could be heard throughout the small town of Gainesville. National speakers such as Booker T. Washington and William Jennings Bryan made speeches in the old courthouse, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s groundbreaking invasion of privacy trial was held there.

After World War II the 1885 courthouse was deemed too small to fit the county’s needs. At the time, ornate courthouses from the 19th century were coming down at a rapid pace in communities across America, all in the name of progress. A group of attorneys filed a lawsuit to preserve the 1885 courthouse, but their efforts were not successful.

The third Alachua County courthouse was dedicated in 1958, and in 1961 the grand old courthouse was demolished. The new courthouse soon outgrew its capacity, leading to the construction of a fourth courthouse. The third courthouse is now the Alachua County Administration Building.

In 1904, the United Daughters of the Confederacy erected a statue representing an anonymous Confederate soldier near the northwest corner of the courthouse, at the intersection of University Avenue and South Main Street. After the building was taken down, the statue was the last artifact of the old courthouse that remained in place. In 2017, after a series of protests, the United Daughters of the Confederacy relocated the statue to Oak Ridge Cemetery in Micanopy.

Several artifacts from the 1885 courthouse still exist. One of the lion statues and a Florida coat of arms are housed inside the Alachua County Administration Building. Another coat of arms, several jurors’ chairs and other courthouse artifacts are part of the Matheson History Museum’s collections. Perhaps the most cherished remnant of the red brick courthouse is the 1885 Seth Thomas clock that is now housed in a new clock tower at University Avenue and Northeast First Street. Its chime can still be heard across downtown Gainesville.